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CIA covert operations are failures, expert says

By Bill Briggs
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The Central Intelligence Agency, which grabbed national headlines recently when it was linked to bombings in Nicaragua, has lost the ability to conceal its actions, an authority on the agency said.

Harry Ransom, a political science professor at Vanderbilt University, said the CIA's covert actions function should be stripped from the agency and performed elsewhere in the federal government.

"It's quite clear that the CIA's covert actions are no longer a secret," Ransom said during a recent interview with the *Nashville Banner*. "And the only point in having covert actions is to be able to have the United States claim disresponsibility."

Ransom, an author of three books on the CIA, added that if covert actions are taken away from the agency, the CIA can concentrate on its main function — intelligence gathering.

"The CIA is number one an intelligence agency," he said. "It is supposed to be informing our top decision makers of world events. But the intelligence fuction has performed poorly over the past few years."

Ransom cited the Iranian crisis

of the late 1970's and the recent Soviet military build up as world events that took U.S. decision makers by surprise.

"The problem can only be solved by taking covert actions away from the CIA," Ransom said, adding, however, that the federal government doesn't know where to put them.

"The State Department doesn't want covert actions, and the Pentagon doesn't want them," he explained. "But both CIA functions (intelligence and covert actions) will suffer if they aren't separated."

The veteran political scientist, who has "watched and studied the CIA" for about 30 years, said serious structural problems have also weakened the agency, leaving its future in doubt.

Ransom said CIA entanglement in partisan politics has greatly weakened the 37-year-old agency.

"The CIA's involvement in partisan politics became acute in the 1980 election, when the Republicans' platform contained detailed criticism of the Democrats' handling of the CIA," he said. "This was the first time this issue crept into a presidential campaign."

Ransom added that both parties have "politicized the intelligence system" and the CIA has suffered as a result.

As a remedy for the CIA's woes, Ransom proposed the creation of a joint House-Senate committee on intelligence, where both parties can "work together to get the CIA out of party politics."

Along with his proposal to remove the covert actions function, Ransom suggested the establishment of a 10-year term for the CIA director.

"I don't think the people who created the CIA gave adequate thought to the problem of partisan politics," he said. "The CIA is trying to function as though the political system has not changed since 1947, and it has changed drastically."